CLIMATE MIGRATION IN PUERTO RICO

AN OVERVIEW

EAST BAY SANCTUARY COVENANT
Puerto Rican migratory patterns are unique due to U.S. citizenship and proximity to the United States. Over individual lifetimes and between generations, people move between the archipelago and the continental U.S. frequently, enacting circular patterns of migration and “return migration” as children move back to the land of their parents and grandparents. Still, Puerto Rico’s lack of social and emergency services and public infrastructure, compounded by increasingly destructive hurricanes, and failure of the U.S. government to provide necessary disaster preparedness and relief funds and services will likely increase displacement and migration.

**ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE**

» As an archipelago in the Gulf of Mexico, Puerto Rico is subject to violent tropical storms that are growing increasingly dangerous as global temperatures rise. In September 2017, Hurricane Maria decimated the island, leaving 6.2 million cubic yards of waste and debris,\(^1\) destroying 786,000 homes\(^2\) and taking an estimated 4,645 lives.\(^3\) CPRS estimates that almost 160,000 people left Puerto Rico in 2018 as a result of the hurricane and that 470,335 residents may ultimately leave for hurricane-related reasons.\(^4\)

» Despite the increased frequency of heavy rainstorms, total rainfall is likely to decrease and Puerto Rico may face an increased risk of drought, which will affect public water supply, agriculture, and economic livelihoods. During the 2015 drought, over 100,000 people faced water restrictions, often losing water for days on end.\(^5\)

\(^3\)Nishant Kishore et al., “Mortality in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria,” July 12, 2018.
\(^4\)Jennifer Hinojosa and Edwin Meléndez, “Puerto Rican Exodus: One Year since Hurricane Maria,” CENTRO: Center for Puerto Rican Studies, September 2018.
Following decades of U.S. financial policy which encouraged international investment and exacerbated national debt and unemployment, the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economist Stability Act (PROMESA) enacted austerity measures that cut funds to health care, social services, utilities, and education.

During Hurricane Maria, workers lacked the capacity and proper equipment to maintain the power grid, leaving some regions without power for almost a year, the longest post-hurricane blackout in Puerto Rican history. Without power, citizens did not have cell service and could not access ATMs or use credit cards, leaving many without access to basic necessities.

Before the hurricane, the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA) habitually failed safe drinking water tests and claimed it lacked the resources to modernize infrastructure. Following the hurricane, an estimated 2.3 million people were at risk for E. coli and other illnesses found in tap water. In September 2018, 1.5 million cases of bottled water delivered by FEMA were found abandoned in an airfield.

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6Alexia Fernández Campbell, “It took 11 months to restore power to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. A similar crisis could happen again,” Vox, Aug 15, 2018.
7“10 Facts about Poverty in Puerto Rico,” Borgen Project.
Although the U.S. allocated $43 billion in relief funds to Puerto Rico, two years after the hurricane only one third of the allocated funds had been disbursed, due to intentional mismanagement by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Rather than mismanaged allocation and distribution of disaster relief funds, the United States needs to invest in Puerto-Rican infrastructure, community relief organizations, and disaster preparedness.

Individuals and community organizations were the heroes of Hurricane Maria. Those with homes set up shelters, fed their neighbors, and provided crucial care to elderly and disabled residents. Increased funding for local disaster response, relief, and recovery organizations is necessary to equip residents with the resources needed to respond to future crises.

How does climate change contribute to forced migration in Puerto Rico?

How is the situation for Puerto Rico different due to U.S. citizenship?

What can we do to support people forced to flee Puerto Rico?

Read Belle Marie Torres Velázquez’s story, excerpted from Mi Maria: Surviving the Storm, Voices from Puerto Rico, part of the Voice of Witness series of oral history, and try to imagine what it was like to deliver a baby at her family’s clinic after Hurricane Maria, “with one generator for the whole clinic, no electricity, no water, and me as the only doctor working with just one nurse.”
» **Discussion Questions & Writing Prompts**

» Read Belle Marie Torres Velázquez’s story, excerpted from *Mi Maria: Surviving the Storm, Voices from Puerto Rico*, part of the Voice of Witness series of oral history, and try to imagine what it was like to deliver a baby at her family’s clinic after Hurricane Maria, “with one generator for the whole clinic, no electricity, no water, and me as the only doctor working with just one nurse.”

» Note human rights abuses in Belle Marie Torres Vasquez’s story. Based on your interpretations of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), analyze how the human rights of Neysha and others in Puerto Rico trying to seek medical services are abused.

» Thinking about Puerto Rico within the global context of this exhibit, what similarities and differences do you see between this region and others?

**FURTHER READING**

» *Mi Maria: Surviving the Storm, Voices from Puerto Rico* by Voice of Witness
In July 2020, multiple news sources reported that directly after Hurricane María, President Trump explored the possibility of selling Puerto Rico. According to Elaine Duke, the acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security at that time, the president asked if it was possible for the US to sell or “divest of that asset.” Other reports reveal that in 2018 the president also floated the idea of trying to trade Puerto Rico to Denmark in exchange for Greenland because, in his words, Puerto Rico is “dirty” and “poor.” While it is particularly onerous to picture the president attempting to barter away a place in which 3.4 million US citizens live—especially while they were experiencing unimaginable loss and destruction—it is not wholly surprising.

Puerto Rico is a twice-colonized place. In 1493, Christopher Columbus landed on its western shores on his second voyage and claimed all he saw for the monarchy of Spain. It remained under Spanish control until the United States took possession of the archipelago in 1898 at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, transferring control from one global power to another. Fully understanding the failed government-led relief efforts in the aftermaths of Hurricane María, then, depends upon contextualizing this disaster within the ongoing trajectory of colonization, marginalization, and ingrained, systemic inequality that has stretched across hundreds of years since first contact between European colonizers and Indigenous peoples. Puerto Rico has consistently been treated as a possession that grants its overseers numerous benefits while they habitually shortchange its people. President Trump’s attempt to leverage Puerto Rico for profit is but one link in a continuous chain of events leading up to Hurricane María and its long aftermaths.

Puerto Rico’s Colonial History

As early as 1823, the US explored purchasing or annexing Caribbean islands as military and economic strongholds. When Cuba rose up against Spanish colonial rule in 1895, the US –
aware of both Cuba’s strategic military location and its lucrative sugar industry—supported independence. On February 15, 1898, six days after the Autonomic Charter was implemented in Puerto Rico, Spanish forces sunk the USS Maine off the shores of Cuba, and in April the US Congress responded with a resolution calling for war. On July 3, a naval battle ensued in the Bay of Santiago de Cuba in which the Spanish fleet was destroyed. Weeks later, US troops invaded Puerto Rico, and on August 12, a ceasefire was signed in which Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States.

The Foraker Act of 1900 assigned Puerto Rico unincorporated territory status, which afforded Puerto Ricans some legal rights for autonomous governance but only allotted a single representative to Congress—the resident commissioner—who does not have voting privileges. This law ultimately maintained colonial status for Puerto Rico by simply transferring power from Spain to the United States.

US citizenship was finally extended to Puerto Ricans in 1917 when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones-Shafroth Act. Approximately one month after this act was signed into law, the US entered World War I and 236,000 Puerto Ricans—newly made US citizens—signed up for selective service and another 104,550 registered for the draft. Almost eighteen thousand Puerto Ricans served in combat in the war. The citizenship in which Puerto Ricans participate does not include a voting representative in Congress, the right to vote for president, or access to many services and benefits that are extended to other citizens.

The Jones-Shafroth Act also institutes triple-tax exemptions for the sale of bonds by the government of Puerto Rico, meaning that purchasers are not charged US federal, state, or local taxes, thereby denying Puerto Rico significant tax revenue while promoting the development of externally owned businesses. The Merchant Marine Act of 1920—commonly referred to as the Jones Act—furthermore includes articles that limit economic stability in Puerto Rico, including stipulations that all goods shipped to the archipelago must arrive on US-made, owned, and operated vessels—even if cheaper options exist—thereby raising the price of almost all imports. Today, the estimated impact of this requirement on the Puerto Rican economy is a $1.5 billion loss
Many reformists, including Luis Muñoz Marín and Carlos E. Chardón called for deeper change to larger systems of inequity that kept Puerto Rico chained to its status as an unincorporated territory. Muñoz Marín continued working for reform with the development of the Industrial Incentives Act of 1947, better known as Manos a la Obra or Operation Bootstrap. The stated intent of the law was to enact economic reform through industrialization by moving away from a plantation economy in which landowners reaped wealth while the remainder of the population lived in poverty. The law and its 1948 amendment, however, incentivized external investment through tax breaks and the promise of a low-cost labor force, and these and other elements of the law had long-reaching effects on economic stability. After the purported success of this program, the US allowed Puerto Rico to elect its own governor in 1948, and Muñoz Marín won. He held the office from 1949 to 1965. Under Muñoz Marín’s leadership, the Puerto Rican Congress wrote Public Act 600, and President Harry S. Truman signed it into law in 1950. This law allowed Puerto Rico to write its own constitution, which ultimately led to the change in status in 1952 from “unincorporated territory” to “commonwealth,” thus making it the Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico). Despite the US government maintaining ultimate control of the archipelago, this revision in status allowed for the removal of Puerto Rico from the United Nations list of Non-Self-Governing Territories—colonies—in 1953. This change freed the US from having to make regular reports to the UN Special Committee on Decolonization.

Following decades of US financial policies that left Puerto Rico with an “unpayable” debt and no ability to declare bankruptcy, in June 2016, President Obama signed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) into law, which facilitated the restructuring of the commonwealth’s debt and established the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), a body with final say on all economic decisions.

The austerity measures enacted by the FOMB under PROMESA have triggered a humanitarian crisis by cutting funds to health
care, social services, utilities, and education as well as stunting the economy for residents. Puerto Rico was allowed to file for bankruptcy in May 2017.

Because of this crippling debt, the government of Puerto Rico cannot serve its people. In 2017 when Hurricane María made landfall, it was estimated that almost half the population of Puerto Rico was living below the poverty line, more than double the rate of any US state. The median income per household that year was approximately $19,000 and the unemployment rate was 10.1 percent. At that time, public schools began closing at an alarming rate and more than thirty thousand students were forced to relocate. Similar to the problems facing PREPA, the water utility habitually failed safe drinking water tests and claimed it lacked the resources to modernize infrastructure.

**Context of Migration**

Although migration from Puerto Rico to the US has been ongoing since citizenship was granted in 1917, there have been two main waves of mass migration from Puerto Rico to the US. The first was in the 1950s. When Muñoz Marín enacted Operation Bootstrap in 1947, dramatically changing the economy from agrarian to industrial, a sharp decline in the number of available jobs led many to seek employment elsewhere. This period also saw both a rise in air travel and the return home of thousands of Puerto Ricans who had served abroad in World War II and developed a more global outlook. Between 1950 and 1960 an estimated 470,000 Puerto Ricans, almost a quarter of the population, moved to the continental US. This mass migration created Puerto Rican diasporic communities throughout the US, with large concentrations in New York and Florida.

The second wave of migration is ongoing and appears to have two distinct stages. Phasing out incentives for businesses to invest in Puerto Rico in the early twenty-first century again led to dramatic job losses and the need for many to find employment elsewhere, triggering this second wave of mass migration. The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CPRS) reports that between 2006 and 2016, Puerto Rico lost more than half a million people to
migration, 14 percent of the total population. Again, a majority in this group moved to Florida and New York, but New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Texas were also popular destinations. By 2016 there were more than 5.5 million Puerto Ricans living in the continental US and only 3.4 million in the archipelago.

Hurricane María struck in the middle of this ongoing economic depression, resulting in extreme depopulation. CPRS estimates that almost 160,000 people left in 2018 as a result of the hurricane and that 470,335 residents may ultimately leave for hurricane-related reasons. People who migrated because of Hurricane María have also been called “climate refugees” or “climate migrants” because these exoduses were spurred by climatological disasters. Puerto Rican migratory patterns, however, are unique due to US citizenship, proximity to the continental United States, and access to air travel. Anthropologist Jorge Duany and others have noted circular migration patterns that are marked by “constant border crossings in both directions.” Many people from Puerto Rico move between the archipelago and the continental United States, sometimes moving back and forth more than once, thereby enacting circular patterns of migration. There are still others who move to Puerto Rico because that is where their parents or grandparents were born, and this move is a form of “return” migration.

Aftermaths of Hurricane Maria

In early September 2017, Category 5 Hurricane Irma hit Puerto Rico, causing massive damage to the east coast and the island municipalities of Culebra and Vieques. Just two weeks later, on September 20, Hurricane María made landfall in the Puerto Rican archipelago as a “high end” Category 4 hurricane, which wreaked havoc over Puerto Rico for approximately thirty hours. Among the destruction caused by the hurricane was the largest blackout in US history, the effects of which lasted well over a year in some regions. Most roads were blocked by fallen trees, downed power lines, electric cables, and other debris. Locals with chainsaws and machetes cleared narrow paths through the debris to allow for travel by car, but some roads remained blocked for weeks or even
months after the hurricane. No area of the island was left undamaged. And, as the cleanup began, huge trash piles began to appear across the landscape. For weeks after the hurricane, access to cash, food, drinking water, and gasoline was severely limited. ATMs were not working due to power outages. Most gas stations and stores were closed. If a business was open, only cash was accepted because point-of-sale systems that stores use to process payments require a cell phone signal and after the hurricane, the majority of the island’s cell phone towers and internet cables were destroyed.

The loss of lives and property from the hurricane is staggering. According to a report Governor Ricardo Rosselló presented to Congress, almost 90 percent of the households in Puerto Rico asked for some form of relief and housing assistance from FEMA. The Associated Press reported that over 786,000 homes were damaged by the hurricane. While the Puerto Rican government originally announced sixty-four deaths related to María, it later commissioned a study from George Washington University that raised the number to 2,975 deaths, which has been accepted as the official count. A similar study by Harvard University, however, estimates that 4,645 people lost their lives as a result of the hurricane.

Due to lack of political commitment from the United States and Puerto Rico’s growing debt, the nation struggled to restore their electricity and infrastructure. Contractual problems were paired with issues related to distribution. In September 2018, twenty thousand pallets—almost one and a half million cases—of bottled water were found at an abandoned airfield. They were brought in by FEMA in the aftermath of Hurricane María and left there, undistributed. By the time they were found, they were undrinkable. The Puerto Rico Department of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency also estimated that 2.3 million people were at risk for illnesses from E. coli and coliforms found in tap water, indicating the presence of high levels of fecal matter and bacteria. In January 2020, a warehouse filled with undistributed goods intended for post–Hurricane María relief—including generators, batteries, emergency radios, cots, bottled water, food, and diapers—was also discovered in Ponce.
Estimates show the damages incurred from Hurricane María range between $90 and $120 billion. The United States congress allocated approximately $43 billion in relief funds; however, two years after the hurricane, only one third of the allocated funds had been disbursed. In just one example of the failure to distribute funds, in October 2019 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) admitted at a US Congressional hearing that it purposefully failed to comply with the law by intentionally missing the deadline to initiate the process for Puerto Rico to access billions of dollars’ worth of funds approved by Congress for hurricane recovery. As of May 2018, approximately 30 percent of the over 1.1 million households that had applied for FEMA grants were denied because they were deemed ineligible. The Puerto Rican Planning Society estimates that 260,000 homes in Puerto Rico don’t have titles or deeds. Often property is passed down through generations or subdivided among family members according to a code of familial honor that does not seek or depend on official state documentation. FEMA follows strict guidelines for proof of ownership, which has prevented many claimants from receiving federal aid.